Limited by Imagination Alone: Research Methods in Cultural Geography

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Introduction: The politics and practice of open embrace

These are exciting times for cultural geography, especially in the often-under-sung realm of methods: spurred by rapidly developing theoretical engagements and pursuit of creative opportunities, our research methods are now as varied as imaginations allow. Through challenges and innovations in methods, cultural geography has flourished—cultural geographers have embraced not only a proliferation of tools and techniques, but profoundly also an active encouragement of diversity in the very ways we carry out our research, and an articulacy in how we talk and write about our research methods.

Cultural geography, from the early twentieth century forward, built a rich field-based tradition, but also a 'just do it' approach to research, where methods were seldom described, discussed, or interrogated. Some twenty five years ago it was still possible for novitiates to be introduced to landscape analysis with a slide of the famous proponent of cultural geography, Carl O. Sauer, pipe in mouth and knapsack beside him, and the quote 'The mode of locomotion should be slow, the slower the better, and be often interrupted by leisurely halts to sit on vantage points and stop at question marks.'[1] At mid century, while human geography as a whole was captivated by the quantitative revolution and the new methods it unleashed, cultural geography, lacking a well-developed tradition of discussing and engaging methods, stood on the sidelines of the discipline. But it was through reactions to the quantitative revolution that cultural geography developed richer approaches to methods. In

so many ways these arose most significantly from feminist geography. Feminist geographers found women's voices and experiences missing in aggregated statistics, but also in field-based research where women were too-often overlooked; they responded with articulate critique that focused not just on women, but often more broadly on methods[2]. Then came the maelstrom of the cultural turn[3], which challenged previous notions of theory-building and what counted as research across the discipline, driving the discipline to find ways to attend to the different realities of different groups, ushering cultural politics to its forefront and drawing methods further into critical discussion[4].

Building from these legacies, contemporary cultural geography has embraced a rapidly evolving theoretical vocabulary, and objects of enquiry have become more fluid—focused more often on practiced, ongoing life than cultural artefacts—seeking less to tidily encapsulate things than to show how things always exceed their concepts, and how the world is inevitably messier than our theories of it.[5] The ways cultural geographers seek to apprehend the world have shifted, from seeking concrete understandings, to embracing performative, processual and assemblage approaches. Meanwhile, concerns with the political became central—with emphasis on the fragility of meanings and structures, their continual contestationand negotiation, even when hegemonic meaning remains. In the twenty-first century, cultural geography stands as testament to radical methodological openness—embracing divergent realities, shifts in social and cultural theories, and supporting research practices that facilitate political re-alignments as our research endeavors continue to open to a politics of difference. Significantly, this comes at a time of methodological articulacy—a time when more departments offer training in research methods, and when cultural geographers are more often talking and writing about their research methods.[6]

Within the context of such radical openness toward theory and practice, and the rise of methodological articulacy, the rapid burgeoning of new research methods, and discussions about them, is not surprising. Unique research methods can develop during one research process and then travel to other projects[7]. Other times, project-specific research methods often into transient practices remain ephemeral. This is often the case in research oriented toward the non-representational, which seeks to speak from fleeting research encounters that create what Phillip Vannini (current issue) dubs 'meshworks', or unique methodological entanglements. On the other hand, when new methods unsettle established ways of knowing, defensiveness can lead to criticism—not for being undertaken poorly but for being undertaken at all. For instance, as Paul Kingsbury remarks (current issue), for some, the acceptance of psychoanalytic geographies still requires a 'leap of faith'.

The openness to 'seeing' methods has led to an upsurge in experimentation an ongoing reflexive process that, at times, might seem to risk valuing novelty, for novelty's sake. An open embrace of new methods, however, has not signaled the demise or erasure of more enduring methods. Well-established research methods, such as those archival and ethnographic (see also Longan, current volume) remain central[8]. As Steve Herbert[9] reminds, though often-unrecognized, many contemporary geographical methods rise from a foundation in ethnography—particularly the very ability to synthesize multiple and messy sources and kinds of information.

Cultural geography has been willing to engage with issues often seen as peripheral or indeed problems to be minimized, bypassed or glossed over in other sub-fields. An example is the

now well-established field of 'emotional geographies', where emotions exist not only as individual states but in motion, and trans-individual flows of affect. We have moved from a world of rational facts which engenders emotional responses, and instead, we come to know emotions as agents entangled in cultural processes. Rather than shying away from emotions, we now think about how people and researchers both know the world *through* prisms of emotion.[10]

So too, cultural geography has challenged the very notion, and language, of stability. Drawing from old and new, from ventures into non-(or more-than[11]) representational performances, to 'creative (re)turns'[12] to literary, artistic and imaginative approaches. We have also then been able to challenge the stability of materialities, rejecting the neatly subordinated materials and laws of a mechanistic worldview.[13] The *creativity* of materials includes thinking about how objects and things come together and all apart —from domestic artefacts to steel plants— and thus form or fall out of assemblages[14].

Seen together, the panoply of research methods across cultural geography (old, new, established, experimental), have resulted from a persistent politics of promise, a sustained commitment to recognizing 'data', or evidence, beyond conventional formats. Such a commitment has been the seduction and scandalous promise of cultural geography: continually exploring new and different ways of working, encountering new topics and approaches, recognizing new geographical knowledges—through open and articulate embrace of diverse methods.

Captured moments; reflections on method

In this collection we offer some cardinal points on an unsettled landscape, a celebration of the pluralism that has become a hallmark of cultural geography, particularly in the research methods that that continue to expand the possibilities for knowledge production, and challenge the limits of what cultural geography is and can be. We offer short papers about methods that together introduce some of the extraordinary variety of research methods in contemporary cultural geography. Together the papers showcase the kinds of research methods that have enlivened cultural geography by pushing boundaries, in empirical, and perhaps more-than-empirical accounts.

We begin with papers looking at new field sites created through technologies and new modes of habitation. Mike Longan brings enduring ethnographic methods to bear on online communities to consider how these methods can be adapted to understand the relationships between online and offline worlds. He argues that digital 'innovations have not fundamentally changed the underlying nature of online space and its relationship with the material world' and flies the flag for fieldwork, site visits and interviews to triangulate data gathered online with a grounded presence. For Justin Spinney, different technologized environments form his research context as he examines the mobile and mobilized body. To capture fleeting movements and in-the-moment responses he suggests new ways of moving with research participants: EEG, GIS, and GSR (Galvanic Skin Response sensors) to measure physical bodily changes in individuals (while walking, cycling, running), and video elicitation interviews as ways to 'bring bodily data to the fore'. Again, combining new technology and a new approach to research, with methods tried and true.

Three papers then take us further into thinking of research in contexts, and research subjects in places that necessitate moving beyond just human subjects of research or the landscape as ground for the figure of culture. Harriet Hawkins rearticulates place-making through drawing and other forms of creative practices, reminding us that our 'formidable disciplinary legacy of the concept of place' has always been entangled with the creative practices that have played a vital role in 'its conceptual evolution and development of allied methodologies'. Bawaka Country, et al. position Country as the contribution's first author, because for Indigenous Australians *country* is inseparable from people. In so doing, they decentre the human authority in authorship in their portrayal of a night fishing trip at Bawaka, in North East Arnhem Land, in the remote far north of Australia. By engaging Indigenous methods in the form of a journey narrative, the paper forwards the decolonisation of geography. Next, Timothy Hodgetts and Jamie Lorimer challenge us to apprehend animal-centred geographies, asking us to step away from the lab and the binoculars so that animals' geographies might be approached anew. Engagement in inter-species communications, for them, includes a focus on play, like a computer-assisted game that enables humans and pigs to play together online (Driessen et al).

Three papers then cluster around emotions and affective understandings, writing emotions into both our subjects of study and ourselves. Hester Parr and Olivia Stevenson's heartfelt account of witnessing with family members of missing people uses interviews in compassionate and informative ways to *assist* with trauma. In this case 'witnessing' refers to both formal police responses/reporting, but more importantly to 'witness talk', or the accounts of the families about their missing loved-ones and the significance of this talk from these 'eye witnesses'. The almost visceral presence of the absent/missing person is felt in the

limbo of loss-without-closure, as are the imaginative geographies deployed to somehow cope, or get through, endless days of no news. In the context of such sensitive and moving work, Parr and Stevenson detail their own emotional geographies. Phillip Vannini's essay also positions the researcher as a messily feeling research participant rather than an objective witness. His argument for non-representational ethnography emphasizes non-realist styles and modes of rendition that are impressionistic and creative, ever critical of dispassionate or impersonal research engagements. Vannini points us to 'find inspiration in the arts, in the poetics of embodied living, in enacting the very un-actualized expressive and impressive potentials of social-scientific knowledge, in taking dedicated risks, in exercising passion, and in finding ways to re-configure thinking, sensing'. Next, Paul Kingsbury provides, for those less familiar with psychoanalysis in geography, both an introduction to psychoanalytic geographies, and clarification of the fundamental principle of desire. Then, drawing on Joan Copjec's *Read my Desire,* Kingsbury offers an example of the utility, as well as critique, of psychoanalysis in geography. He uses a fictional English comedic character, Alan Partridge, to exemplify some of the rawness and awkwardness of human desire. Rather than providing a roadmap to do psychoanalysis, however, some of its main tenets—of appearance, being and negation (where the unsaid, or repressed, leaves signatures)—are portrayed in Partridge to amusing, if cringe-worthy affect.

Finally, with the excitement and controversy over what may threaten a return to positivism, two commentaries on Big Data. Matthew Wilson's intervention into the so-called 'fourth paradigm' reminds us to question the veracity of 'data' generated through social media, and that social media is a phenomenon rather than a source of evidence of phenomena. In a similarly critical vein, Mike Crang forwards Hayles' point about our eagerness to read

artefacts as text, rather than texts as artefacts[15]. Crang turns to the effects of digital media on academia, 'first by converging forms of knowledge as they become digital', and second through the 'application of new computational techniques to old issues.' Digital media, he reminds, 'renders the social perceptible in new ways' and so offers new avenues for exploration.

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[1] C. O. Sauer, 1956; The Education Of A Geographer, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 46, Iss. 3, 287—299, p.296.

[2] D. DeLyser, 2008. Teaching qualitative research, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 32(2): 233-244; M. Cope, 2010. A history of qualitative research in geography, in D. DeLyser, S. Herbert, S. Aitken, M. Crang, and L. McDowell, Eds., *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 25-45.

[3] This shift in orientation to cultural processes was pivotal in human geography, but also hotly contested (see for instance, Sayer A. 1994. Cultural Studies and 'the economy stupid'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **12**, 645-7.

[4] DeLyser, Teaching qualitative geography; Cope, A history of qualitative research.

[5] J. Law *After method: Mess in social science research* London: Routledge, 2004.

[6] DeLyser, Teaching qualitative research.

[7] A well-cited example is: Alan Latham, 2003, Research, performance and doing human geography: some reflections on the diary-photograph, diary-interview method, *Environment and Planning A,* 35, 1993-2017.

[8] C.f. Dydia DeLyser and Daniel Sui, 2014. Crossing the qualitative-quantitative chasm III: Enduring methods, open geography, participatory research, and the fourth paradigm, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 38(2) 294–307. See also Steve Herbert, 2000. For Ethnography, *Progress in Human Geography* 24, 4 pp. 550–568.

[9] Steve Herbert, 2000. For Ethnography, *Progress in Human Geography* 24, 4 pp. 550–568.

[10] Anderson, B. (2014). Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd. Bennett, K. "Emotion and place promotion: Passionate about a former coalfield." Emotion, Space and Society **8**: 1–10(0); Crang, M. and D. P. Tolia-Kelly (2010). "Nation, race, and affect: senses and sensibilities at national heritage sites." Environment and Planning A **42**(10): 2315-2331; Maddrell, A. (2013). "Living with the deceased: absence, presence and absence-presence." Cultural Geographies **20**(4): 501-522; Thrift, N. (2004). "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect." Geografiska Annaler B **86**(1): 57-78; Tolia-Kelly, D. P. and M. Crang (2010). "Affect, race, and identities." Environment and Planning A **42**(10): 2309-2314.

[11] Hayden Lorimer, 2005; "Cultural geography: the busyness of being 'more-than-representational'", *Progress in Human Geography* 29, 1 pp. 83–94.

[12] Mike Crang, this volume. Pxx.

[13] Such a position of course has a long history in arguments over the roles of models in natural sciences see Kennedy, B. A. (1979). "A naughty world." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*: 550-558.

[14] Crang, M. (2012). Tristes Entropique: steel, ships and time images for late modernity in. G. Rose and D. Tolia-Kelly, op cit..; de Silvey 2006, 20-07 op cit; Swanton, D. (2013). "The steel plant as assemblage." Geoforum **44**: 282–291.

[15] N. K. Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p.19.